TALES CONTRIVED TO FLIP YOU OUT OF YOUR
SKULL
50¢
ADULTS ONLY

"YOU ASK ME WHY YOU WERE BORN INTO A CITY OF GHOULS AND MURDERERS, A NATION CONVULSED WITH THE LUST TO WAR ... I WILL TELL YOU— IT IS BECAUSE YOUR BELOVED ANCESTORS PERFORMED UNSPEAKABLE CRIMES IN SECRET AND IN SILENCE ... AND NOW YOU MUST PAY THE HIDEOUS PRICE!"

—HERMANN HESSE

SKULL #6 – A GOTHIC TALE – WRITTEN BY TOM VEITCH, & ILLUSTRATED BY GREG IRONS & RICHARD CORBEN

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CAMP PENDLETON, CA 92055

A Gothic Tale

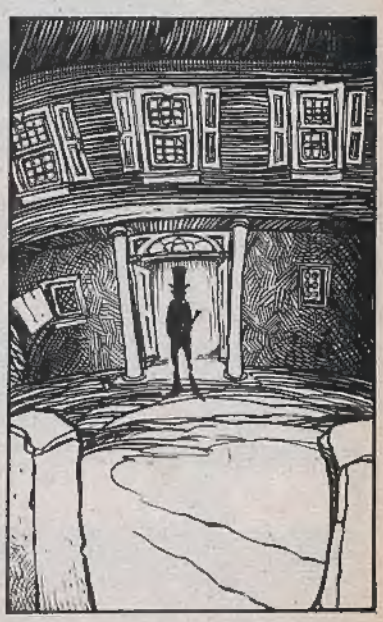
GREETINGS, WASTED LOVERS OF THE VERTIGINOUS VORTEX! THIS IS YER OLD PAL, THE **SKULL**, WITH ANOTHER FETID TALE TO TELL... IT'S SAID THAT THE GREATEST HORRORS OF ALL LIE JUST UNDER THE SURFACE OF EVERYDAY LIFE! LOOK AT ME — A SIMPLE MORGUE ATTENDANT BY NIGHT, BUT MY DAYS ARE SPENT ROAMING THE ELDRITCH AEONS SEEKING OUT THOSE COMMON FOLK WHO SOMETIMES TOUCH UPON THE MOST HIDEOUS OF TRUTHS...

RECENTLY I UNCOVERED A WHOLE **BUNCH** OF BLASPHEMERS IN 1860 NEW ENGLAND... IN THE BLEAK COASTAL VILLAGE OF YARMOUTH, MAINE...

• • • • •

THIS IS THE RESIDENCE OF DR. LUCIUS RODIN, A YOUNG PHYSICIAN OF WIT AND INTELLIGENCE...

HIS INTEREST IN THE REALMS OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE HAS LED HIM FAR AFIELD FROM THE CONVENTIONAL INVESTIGATIONS OF MEDICAL SCIENCE...



HERE COMES DOC RODIN! DON'T USUALLY SEE HIM UP THIS EARLY!
THE SIMPLE TOWNSFOLK RESPECT RODIN – HE IS KNOWN AS A GOOD DOCTOR – BUT THEY ARE SUSPICIOUS OF HIS UN-ORTHODOX WAYS...

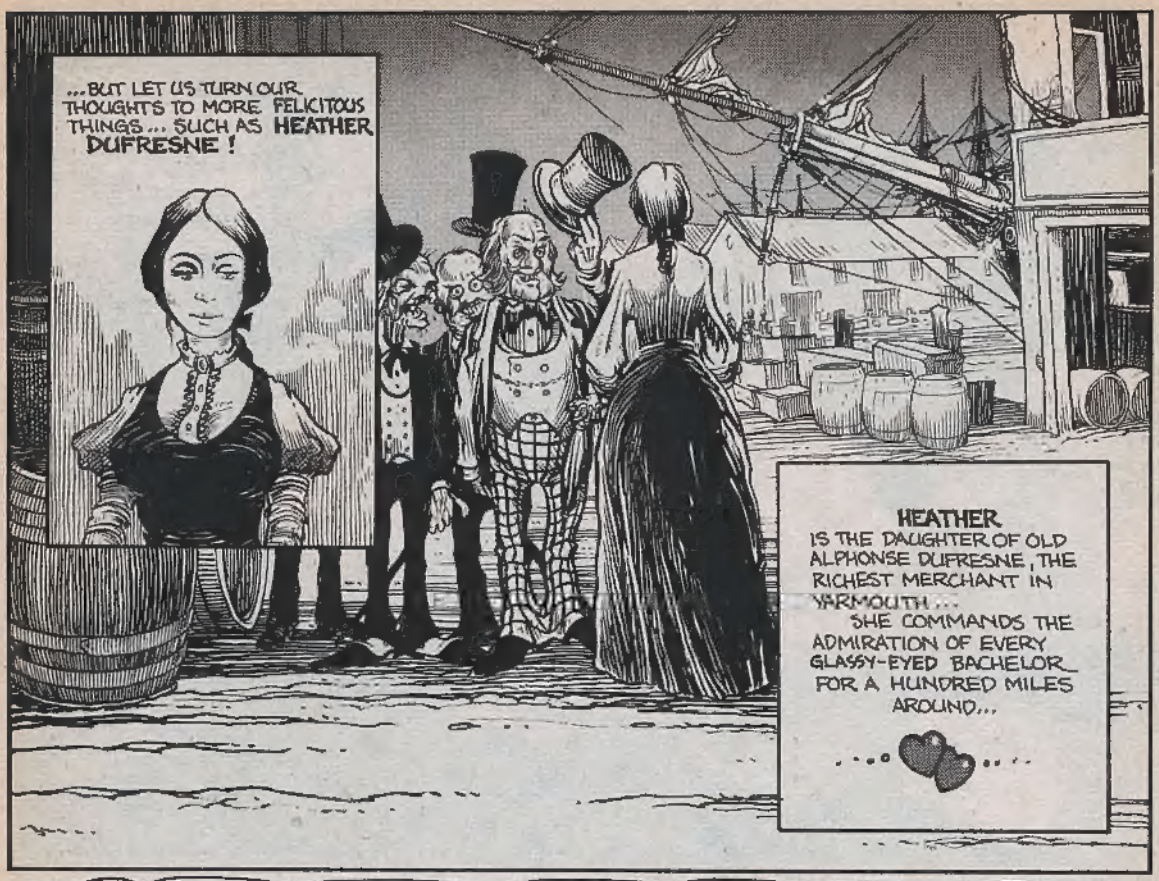
GOOD MORNING, GENTLEMEN!
'GD AFTERNOON, DOC!
THE LIGHTS IN RODIN'S LABORATORY BURN THROUGH THE NIGHT ... IT IS ALREADY AFTERNOON WHEN HE MAKES HIS FIRST HOUSE CALLS...

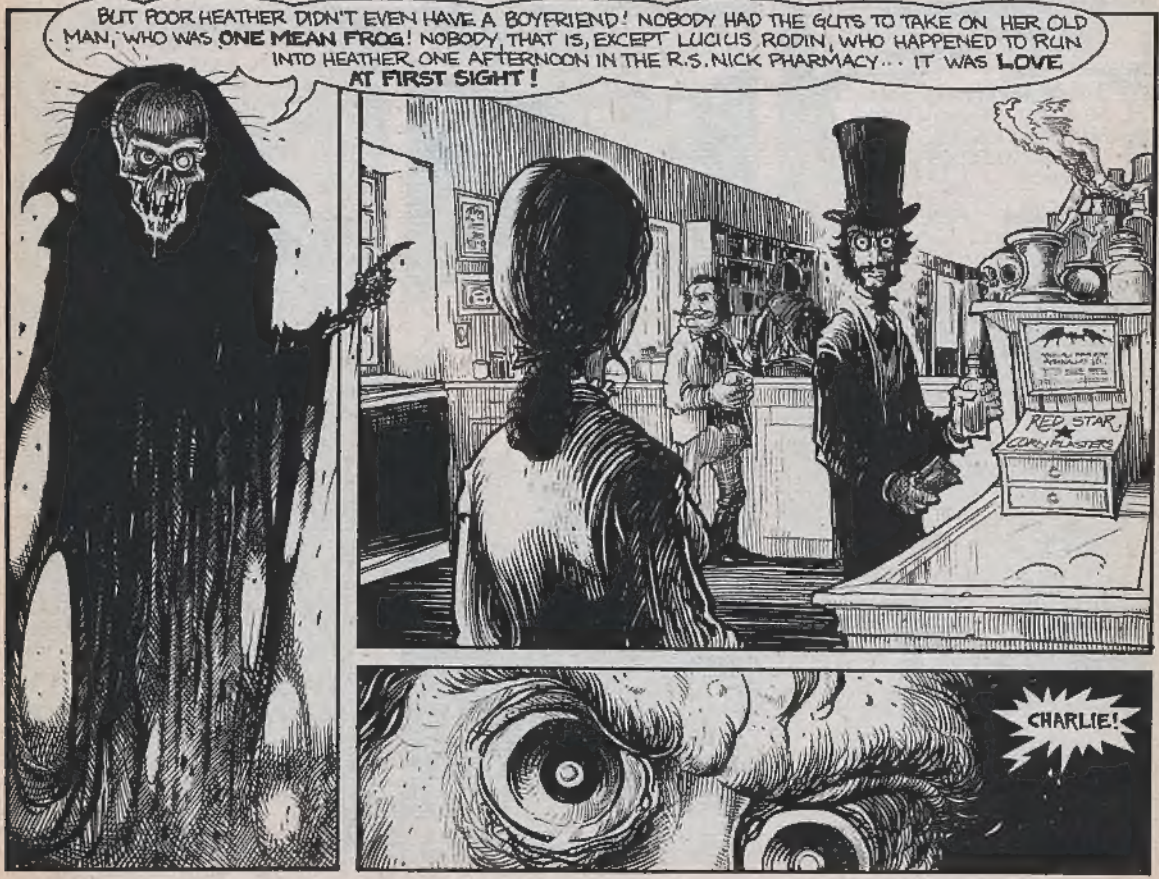
DID YA KNOW I SAW ABOUT SIX O' THEM CHINESE PEOPLE UP TA HIS PLACE LAST NIGHT?!
SOMETHIN' STINKY GOIN' ON, IF YA ASK ME..
TOGLESH SHELGOTH

IT WAS TRUE! A GREAT NUMBER OF SWARTHY FOREIGNERS AND ORIENTALS HAD PASSED THROUGH YARMOUTH IN RECENT MONTHS...

SOME OF THEM HAD SETTLED IN THE WHARF DISTRICT AND OPENED STRANGE SHOPS THAT REEKED OF INCENSE AND OPIUM...

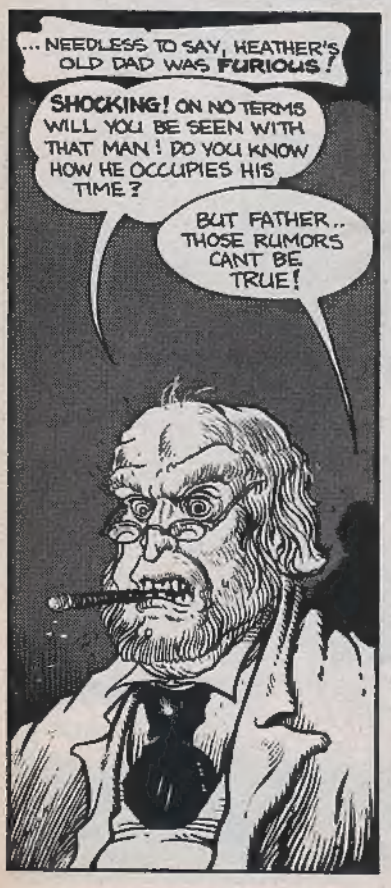
THESE PEOPLE WERE KNOWN TO VISIT RODIN – ALWAYS AT NIGHT ... AND FROM TIME TO TIME, RODIN HIMSELF WOULD BE SEEN LURKING IN THE SHADOWS OF THEIR DINGY ESTABLISHMENTS, EXCHANGING CONVERSATION WITH SOME EXOTIC SPECIMEN OF HUMANITY...

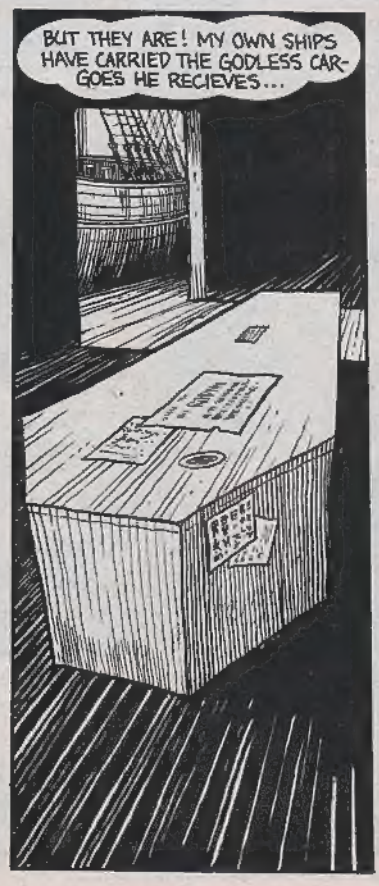

...BUT LET US TURN OUR THOUGHTS TO MORE FELICITOUS THINGS... SUCH AS HEATHER DUFRESNE!
HEATHER IS THE DAUGHTER OF OLD ALPHONSE DUFRESNE, THE RICHEST MERCHANT IN YARMOUTH... SHE COMMANDS THE ADMIRATION OF EVERY GLASSY-EYED BACHELOR FOR A HUNDRED MILES AROUND...


BUT POOR HEATHER DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A BOYFRIEND! NOBODY HAD THE GUTS TO TAKE ON HER OLD MAN, WHO WAS ONE MEAN FROG! NOBODY, THAT IS, EXCEPT LUCIUS RODIN, WHO HAPPENED TO RUN INTO HEATHER ONE AFTERNOON IN THE R.S. NICK PHARMACY... IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT!
RED STAR CORN PLASTERS
CHARLIE!

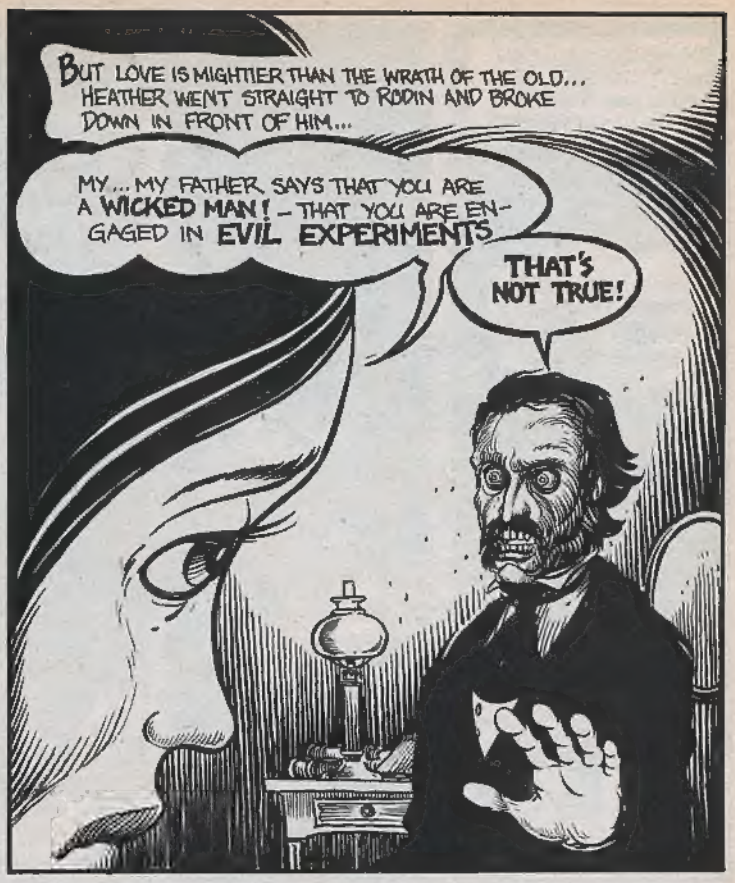
A FEW DAYS LATER, HEATHER FOUND OUT SHE HAD A GUMBOIL.. SHE VISITED THE DOC... HE SUGGESTED A WALK IN THE COUNTRY AIR MIGHT DO HER GOOD...

PERHAPS THIS WILL HELP YOUR GUMBOIL DEAR LADY!

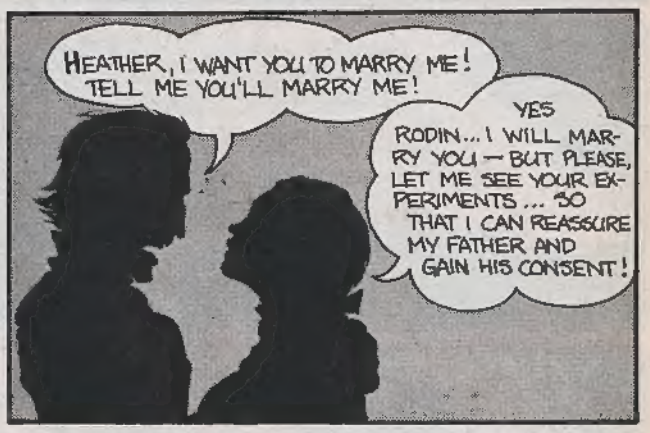




NO
HEATHER, I WON'T HAVE IT! DO YOU HEAR ME? THAT MAN IS UP TO SOMETHING BLASPHEMOUS!
OH FATHER!


BUT LOVE IS MIGHTIER THAN THE WRATH OF THE OLD... HEATHER WENT STRAIGHT TO RODIN AND BROKE DOWN IN FRONT OF HIM...
MY... MY FATHER SAYS THAT YOU ARE A WICKED MAN! – THAT YOU ARE ENGAGED IN EVIL EXPERIMENTS
THAT'S NOT TRUE!

YES, I AM EXPERIMENTING, BUT NOT FOR EVIL! I AM WORKING FOR THE SALVATION OF MANKIND.. SOMEDAY THE NAME OF RODIN WILL RESOUND THROUGH THE WORLD!!


HEATHER, I WANT YOU TO MARRY ME! TELL ME YOU'LL MARRY ME!
YES RODIN... I WILL MARRY YOU – BUT PLEASE, LET ME SEE YOUR EXPERIMENTS ... SO THAT I CAN REASSURE MY FATHER AND GAIN HIS CONSENT!

NO! THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! THERE MUST BE SOME OTHER WAY!

AND SO THE SITUATION WENT UNRESOLVED... UNTIL ONE NIGHT IN EARLY SEPTEMBER..
SHUB NIGRA AZAR! PONYARL THOTEP MEPHISTI! CANIS ROWFUS MOBLIS!

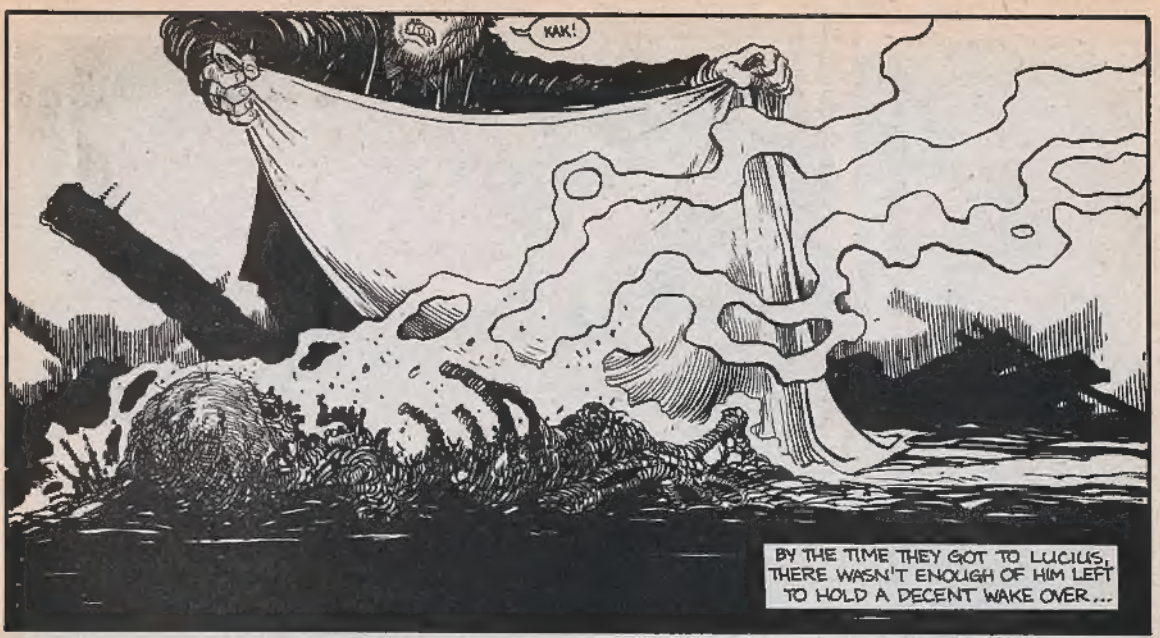
BOOM!

KRUMMMMM..MM..MM

KRA-BLOOM!
KRRROOMBLOO
POOM!

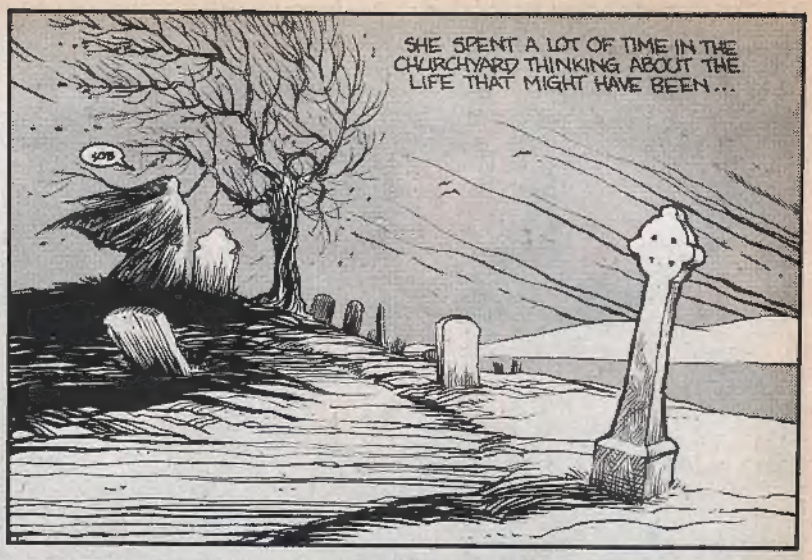
"ORANGE AND GREEN FLAMES BELCHED INTO THE SKIES OF YARMOUTH... FROM HER BEDROOM HEATHER DUFFRESNE SAW THE EXPLOSION AND RUSHED TO THE SCENE...

LUCIUS! OH LUCIUS! OH GOD! HE'LL BE KILLED!
YA CAN'T GO IN THERE MA'M! NOTHIN'S A-LIVE IN THAT!


KAK!
BY THE TIME THEY GOT TO LUCIUS, THERE WASN'T ENOUGH OF HIM LEFT TO HOLD A DECENT WAKE OVER...

YEAH, SO THAT'S THE END OF LUCIUS RODIN... LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM TURNED TO ASHES UNDER A GREY AUTUMN SKY, THE WIND RUSTLIN' IN THE DRY LEAVES, THE CASKET STILL DAMP WITH HEATHER'S TEARS WHEN THEY THREW IN THE LAST SHOVELFUL OF DIRT... YA MIGHT THINK THE LOVE AFFAIR WAS OVER, BUT THAT AIN'T QUITE SO...

... SEEMS HEATHER JUST COULDN'T FORGET TH' DOC... SHE TOOK TO WEARIN' BLACK AND WANDERING AROUND THE TOWN LIKE A LOST CHILD...


SHE SPENT A LOT OF TIME IN THE CHURCHYARD THINKING ABOUT THE LIFE THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN...
SOB

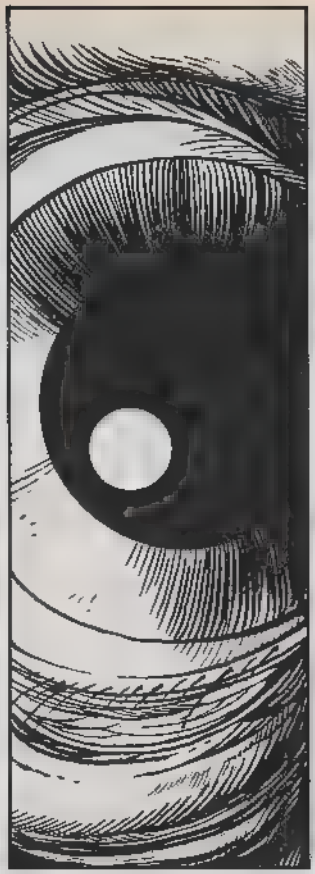
... THERE WERE OTHERS WHO VISITED THE GRAVE OF RODIN...

ONE EVENING SHE CAME LATER THAN USUAL TO THE CEMETERY... A FROST WAS ON THE GROUND AND THE MIST HAD SETTLED IN...

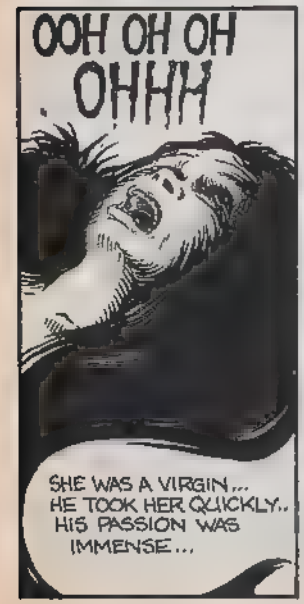
AS SHE APPROACHED RODIN'S GRAVE SHE SENSED SOMEONE MOVING IN THE MIST...
WH-WHO'S THERE?

THE FIGURE CAME TOWARDS HER... IT'S FEATURES TOOK FORM... IT WAS HIM!
DEAR GOD!
HELLO, HEATHER!

YEP... IT WAS TH' DOC IN THE FLESH! NOT A HAIR OUT OF PLACE... TEETH SPARKLIN' LIKE THEY'D JUST BEEN BRUSHED!
COME HEATHER.. THERE IS LITTLE TIME..



HE PLACED HIS OWN WAISTCOAT ON THE GROUND... AND THEN EVER SO GENTLY HE DISROBED HER AND LAID HER DOWN..


OOH OH OH OHHH
SHE WAS A VIRGIN... HE TOOK HER QUICKLY.. HIS PASSION WAS IMMENSE...

AHHH... LUCIUS... YOU ARE WONDERFUL!
ALL HER SORROWS VANISHED.. SHE FELT AS IF SHE HAD WOKEN FROM A BAD DREAM...

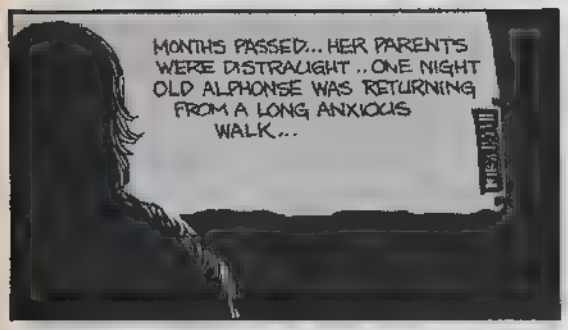
EEEEEE

EEEEEEE
EEEEE

WELL.. HEH HEH.. NEEDLESS TO SAY, HEATHER TOOK TH' DOC'S SECOND DEPARTURE LIKE A KICK IN THE HEAD!

RIGHT AWAY SHE STARTED ACTING STRANGE

...THEY SAY SOMETHING FRIGHTFUL HAPPENED TO HER IN THE CHURCHYARD! THOSE FILTHY ORIENTALS WERE SEEN LURKING ABOUT AT THE TIME!
THEY SHOULD SEND THEM BACK TO THEIR FILTHY RICE FIELDS!


MONTHS PASSED... HER PARENTS WERE DISTRAUGHT.. ONE NIGHT OLD ALPHONSE WAS RETURNING FROM A LONG ANXIOUS WALK...

MY GOD! IT'S HEATHER!

GOOD LORD! SHE . SHE'S PREGNANT!
AHHIEEEAA!

HEATHER!
YES, STRANGER EVEN THAN THE MADNESS THAT WAS UPON HER, HEATHER DUFRESNE HAD CONCIEVED A CHILD!

FROM THAT DAY FORWARD, HEATHER WAS LOCKED IN HER ROOM, TO KEEP HER CONDITION SECRET FROM THE TOWN...

SHE BECAME SULLEN, ATE RAVENOUSLY, AND SCREAMED UNCONTROLLABLY IF THEY DARED TO TOUCH HER..

OOK OOK SKRUK

NOT ONLY THAT, BUT SHE'S PUTTIN' ON SOME WEIGHT! WONDER WHAT THOSE GLASSY-EYED BACHELORS WOULD SAY NOW!

DUFRESNE, WEALTHY CAPITALIST, BROUGHT IN THE BEST DOCTORS FROM SWITZERLAND, FRANCE, & GERMANY..

YA! ZIS IZ UND INTERESTING CASE, HERR DUFRESNE, BUT I AM AFRAID ZERE IZ NOTHING VE CAN DO UNTIL SHE DELIVERS!

OUI OUI!

HER PARENTS DECIDED THAT AFTER THE CHILD WAS BORN THEY WOULD PUT IT UP FOR ADOPTION, THEN SEND HEATHER TO VIENNA WHERE HER NEURASTHENIA COULD BE PROPERLY TREATED

TOG SMOTETH HORGUS

CRASH!

THUMP

FUCK SHIT PISS!

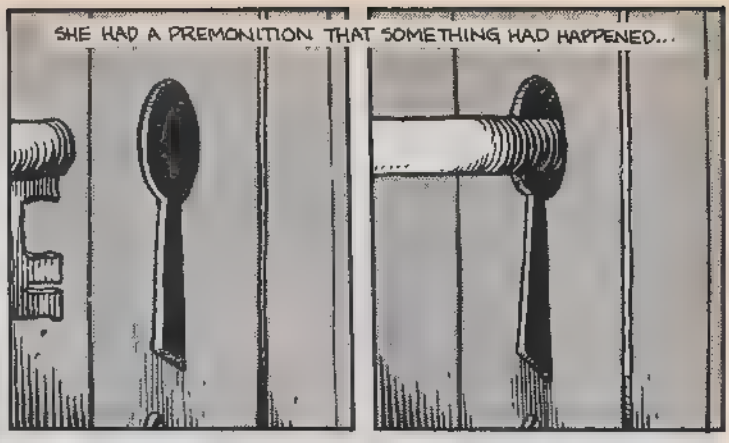
CRASH!

CRUNK

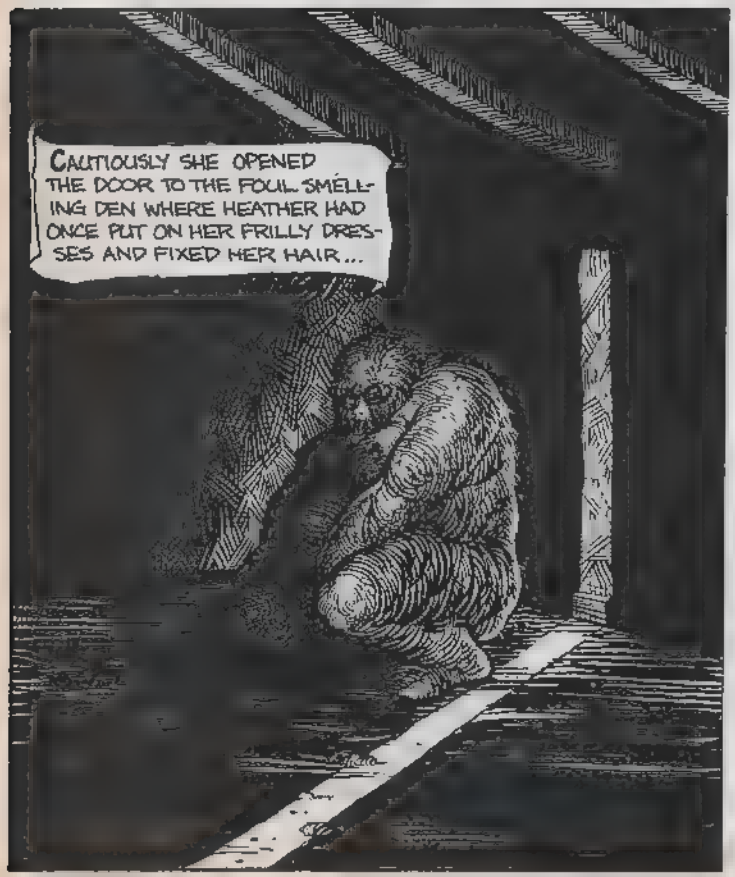
GRARRR.

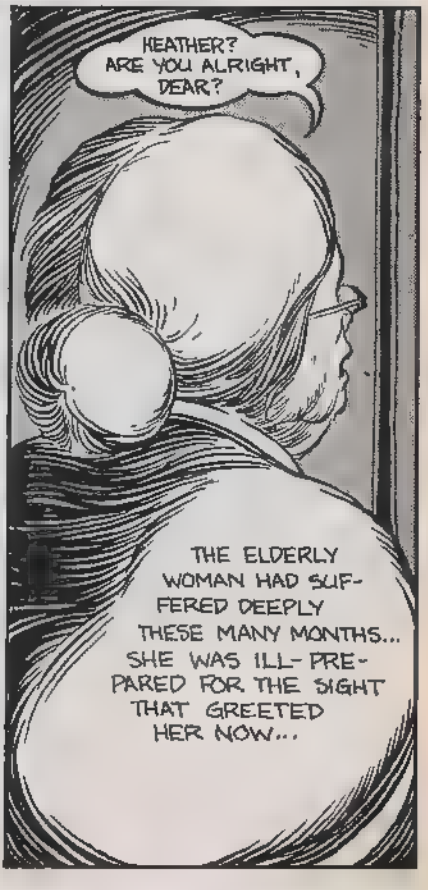
...AND SO THE MONTHS PASSED.. SUMMER CAME AND WENT.. THE PREGNANCY DRAGGED ON WELL PAST THE NINTH MONTH...

ONE EVENING IN THE DEAD OF WINTER HEATHER'S MOM BROUGHT THE LAST OF TEN DAILY MEALS...


SHE HAD A PREMONITION THAT SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED...

PERHAPS HER TIME HAS COME.. AT LAST.
KLIK
KREEE


CAUTIOUSLY SHE OPENED THE DOOR TO THE FOUL-SMELLING DEN WHERE HEATHER HAD ONCE PUT ON HER FRILLY DRESSES AND FIXED HER HAIR...


HEATHER? ARE YOU ALRIGHT, DEAR?
THE ELDERLY WOMAN HAD SUFFERED DEEPLY THESE MANY MONTHS... SHE WAS ILL-PREPARED FOR THE SIGHT THAT GREETED HER NOW...

HEATHER ?
GRRR .
GRAARGH!

OUT INTO THE SNOW THE POOR GIRL RAN, MEMORIES OF HANDSOME RODIN STILL FLICKERING IN HER SAVAGED MIND...
GAAAR..
PUFF PANT
EMMA! WHAT HAPPENED!

EMMA! FOR GOD'S SAKE WOMAN! WHERE'S HEATHER?

OH ALPHIE, SHE... IT WAS HORRIBLE!

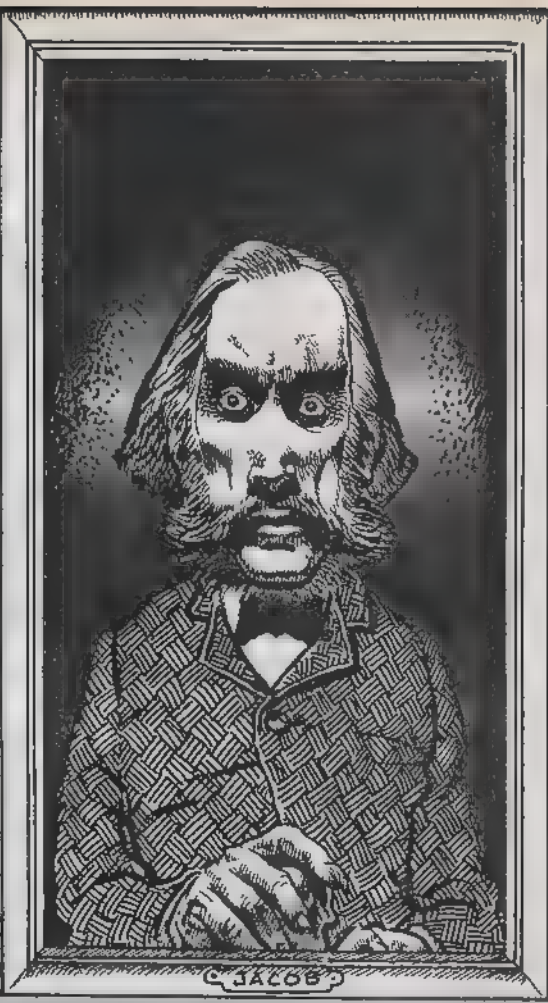
WITHIN MINUTES OLD DUFRESNE AND HIS FRIEND ARE FOLLOWING HEATHER'S TRACKS THROUGH THE SNOW...
LOOK! BLOOD!

MON DIEU, ALPHONSE! SHE'S HEADING FOR THE CHURCHYARD!

AAARRRGH! EEEEE!!

ARGH!
MY LITTLE GIRL!

THEY FOUND HER BEHIND THE CHURCH, DEAD IN THE SNOW... HER BELLY RIPPED OPEN AND BLOODY FOOTPRINTS DISAPPEARING INTO THE RAVENING NIGHT! THE BABY— IF THAT'S WHAT IT WAS— WAS GONE!!
LIKE TH' MAN SAYS, IT'S THE REAL THING! FORTUNATELY FOR HEATHER, THE STORY HAS A HAPPY ENDING! TURN THE PAGE AN' MY LITTLE BUDDY GURGY TATE WILL TELL YA ALL ABOUT IT!
Irons·Veitch



"I KNEW BY LEGEND OF SINISTER EVENTS IN OUR FAMILY HISTORY... I DID MY BEST TO THINK LITTLE OF THESE THINGS.

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER LUCIUS RODIN WAS KILLED IN A MYSTERIOUS EXPLOSION IN 1860. HIS SON JACOB WAS RAISED BY SEEDY ORIENTALS, IN THE WATERFRONT SLUMS OF YARMOUTH, MAINE...

WE HAVE A PAINTING OF GRANDFATHER JACOB. THERE IS A SPECTRAL LOOK ABOUT HIM... HIS ANIMAL STARE WOULD SEND ME INTO CONVULSIONS AS A CHILD...

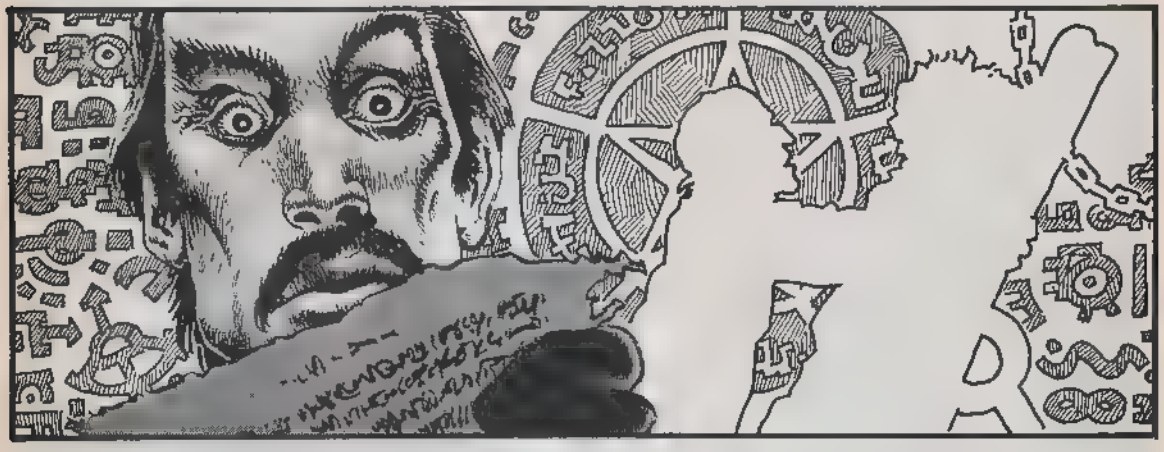
IT IS SAID THAT JACOB AND ALL WHO COME AFTER HIM CARRY A CURSE... A CURSE VISITED UPON US BY OUR MONSTROUS ANCESTOR, LUCIUS RODIN!

A GOTHIC TALE PART II

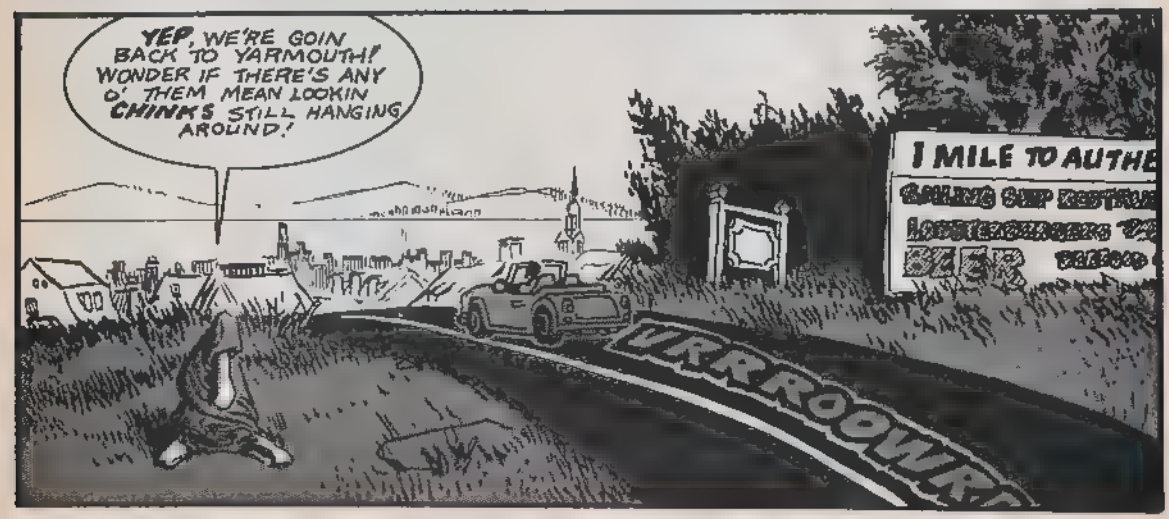
...MY GRANDFATHER DID NOT LEARN OF HIS TRUE RELATIONSHIP TO LUCIUS RODIN UNTIL HE WAS NEARLY FORTY. AT THAT TIME HE PETITIONED SUCCESSFULLY TO RECLAIM THE FAMILY ESTATE.

AMONG THE EFFECTS OF THIS ESTATE WERE CERTAIN CURIOUS PAPERS BELONGING TO OLD LUCIUS...

I HAPPENED TO RUN ACROSS THESE PAPERS AFTER MY OWN FATHER'S DEATH. THEY SEEMED TO VERIFY THE FAMILY STORIES THAT GREAT-GRANDFATHER LUCIUS HAD BEEN CONDUCTING BIZARRE AND ABHORRENT EXPERIMENTS AT THE TIME OF THE FATAL EXPLOSION... THEY WERE ALCHEMICAL TREATISES, A CRYPTIC

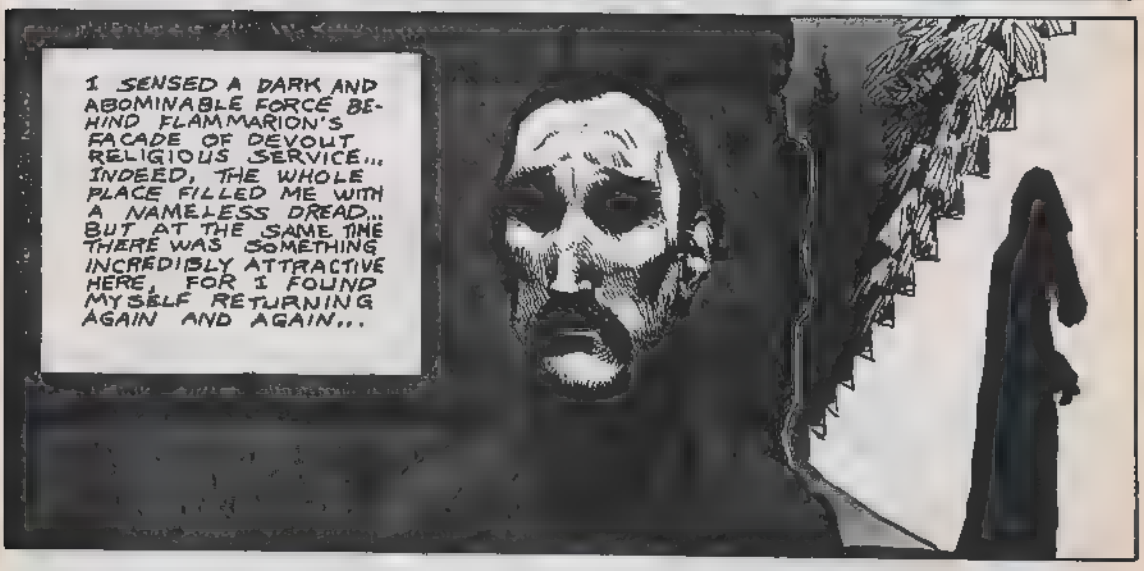


MIXTURE OF SCIENTIFIC AND OCCULT JARGON, SCATTERED WITH REFERENCES TO **"THE LIFE-GIVING PRINCIPLE"** AND **"JELLYISH CREATURES"**... WHAT LITTLE I UNDERSTOOD WHETTED MY INTEREST AND DREW ME INTO FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS OF MY MYSTERIOUS ANCESTOR AND THE SUPPOSED **"CURSE"** HE HAD BESTOWED UPON ME...



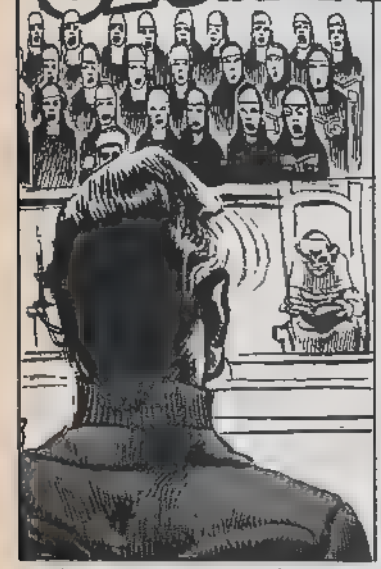
SO I VISITED YARMOUTH, AND THERE I DISCOVERED THAT A ROMAN CATHOLIC CONVENT HAD BEEN BUILT ON THE SIGHT OF MY ANCESTRAL HOME... THE ANCIENT PRIOR, FATHER FLAMMARION, WAS KIND ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN THAT GREAT-GRANDFATHER LUCIUS HAD LEFT THE PROPERTY TO THE NUNS IN HIS WILL...

YES, HECTOR, WOULD YOU BELIEVE THERE ARE WHOLE NATIONS OF HEATHEN WHO HAVE YET TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD?
THEY WERE A MISSIONARY GROUP, FOUNDED IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND WORKING MOSTLY IN THE ORIENT. THEY HAD BUILT THIS CONVENT AS A TRAINING FACILITY SHORTLY AFTER LUCIUS' DEATH 100 YEARS BEFORE.


I SENSED A DARK AND ABOMINABLE FORCE BEHIND FLAMMARION'S FACADE OF DEVOUT RELIGIOUS SERVICE... INDEED, THE WHOLE PLACE FILLED ME WITH A NAMELESS DREAD... BUT AT THE SAME TIME THERE WAS SOMETHING INCREDIBLY ATTRACTIVE HERE, FOR I FOUND MYSELF RETURNING AGAIN AND AGAIN...

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO

GGRRROOWWLLERRRRR...



SOMETIMES WHILE SITTING IN THE LITTLE CHAPEL AS THE GOOD SISTERS SANG THE MASS...

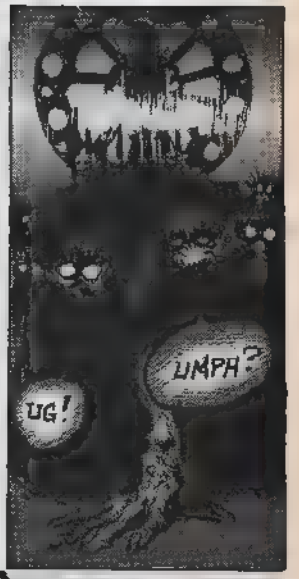
...I WOULD BEGIN TO DETECT A COARSE AND UGLY TONE IN THEIR INNOCENT VOICES...

SHUDDERING WITH FEAR AND DISTAST I WAS FORCED TO LEAVE THE CHURCH.

WHADYA EXPECT WHEN THEY SERVE BEANS 'N' GREEN APPLES FOR LUNCH!

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS I HAUNTED THE TOWN, PICKING UP BITS OF INFORMATION FROM THE OLDER INHABITANTS AND FROM NEWSPAPER FILES... IT SEEMED THAT THE LOATHESOME ACTIVITIES SURROUNDING MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER HAD NOT CEASED WITH HIS DEATH... I BEGAN TO REALIZE THAT THE CONVENT MUST INDEED HOLD THE SECRET I WAS LOOKING FOR...

SO I WENT THERE, AT NIGHT, AND FOUND THE CHURCH UNLOCKED...



THESE MONSTROUS CREATURES STOOD QUIET FOR A LONG TIME, SNIFFING THE AIR FOR MY WHEREABOUTS... THEN I HEARD THE SCUTTLING OF THEIR CLAWS AS THEY CAME TOWARD ME THROUGH THE GLOOM... I COULD NOT MOVE!

I WAS FROZEN WITH FEAR!!

THEIR TOUCH WAS OF DEATH... COLD, WET, DRAWING THE WARMTH FROM MY BODY. THEY CARRIED ME THROUGH A DOOR BEHIND THE ALTAR AND WE DESCENDED ENDLESSLY INTO FOUL AND FETID DARKNESS...

MY CLOTHES WERE STRIPPED OFF AND A SINGLE WHITE GARMENT WAS PLACED OVER MY HEAD... I WAS TRANSPORTED TO ANOTHER LARGE CHAMBER LIT WITH OIL LAMPS... HERE WERE GATHERED THE MOST REPULSIVE CREW I'D EVER HAD THE DISPLEASURE TO MEET...

WHAT THE FUCK'S GOING ON!?

WELCOME BACK RODIN!

IT IS GOOD TO HAVE YOU-

-AMONG US AGAIN.

I SPEAK NOT TO HECTOR, BUT TO YOU, LUCIUS RODIN, OUR MASTER!

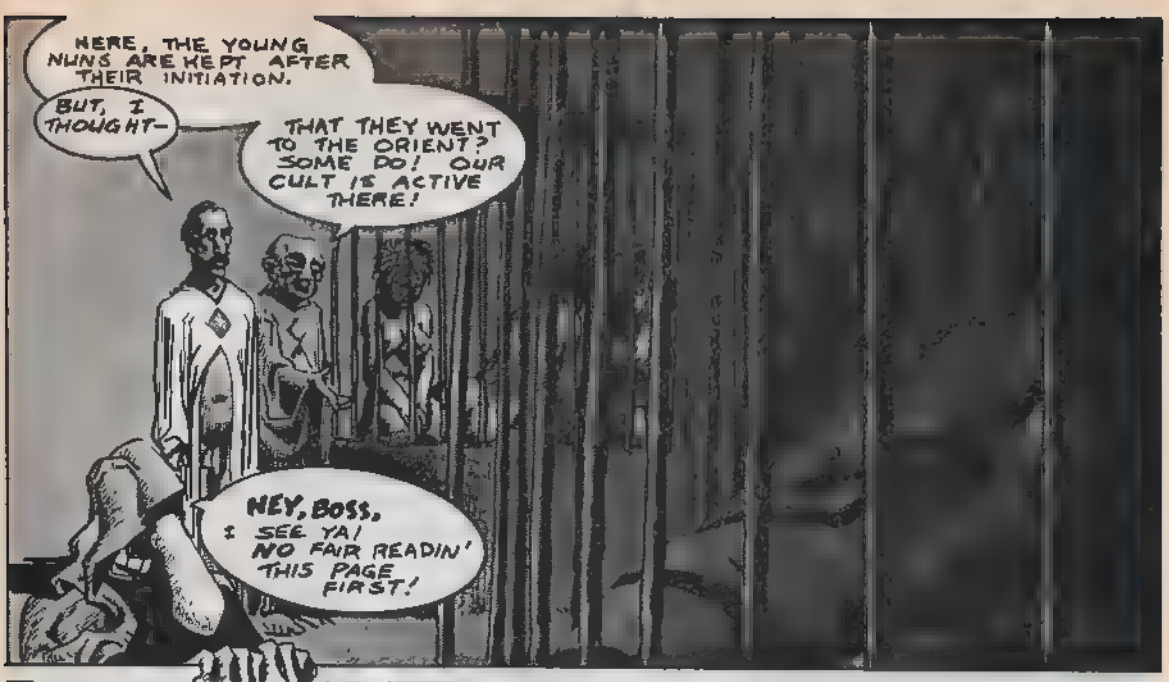
I FELT SOMETHING DARK RISE UP LIKE A HOWLING STORM WITHIN ME...

MANFULLY I WITHSTOOD ITS ONRUSHING ATTACK...

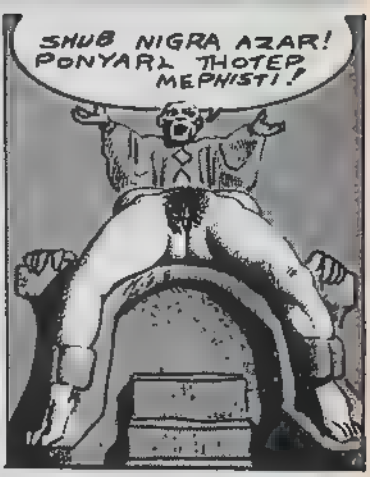
I'M SORRY FLAMMARION, I'LL NOT BE PUSHED OUT OF MY OWN BODY!

HE LAUGHED AT MY WORDS... I KNEW THEN I MIGHT NEVER LEAVE THIS CRYPT ALIVE!

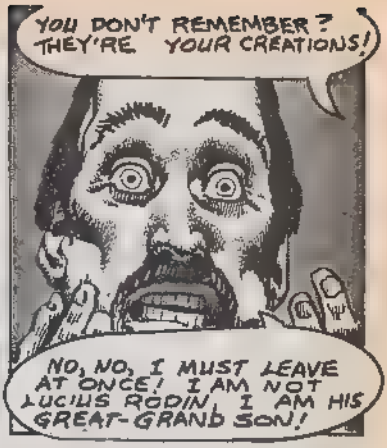
WELL, HECTOR, THEN LET ME SHOW YOU OUR SACRED ACTIVITIES... TO STIR YOUR ANCESTRAL MEMORIES!


HERE, THE YOUNG NUNS ARE KEPT AFTER THEIR INITIATION.
BUT, I THOUGHT—
THAT THEY WENT TO THE ORIENT? SOME DO! OUR CULT IS ACTIVE THERE!
HEY, BOSS, I SEE YA! NO FAIR READIN' THIS PAGE FIRST!

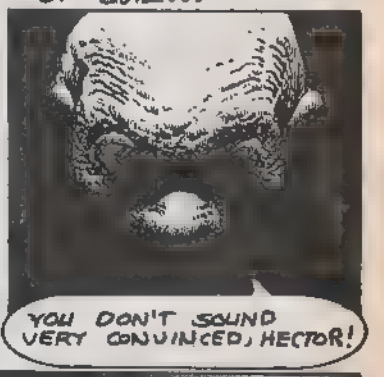
HERE THE NUNS PERFORM THEIR SERVICE... THE ALTAR OF THE UN-ONE!


SHUB NIGRA AZAR! PONYARL THOTEP MEPHIST!

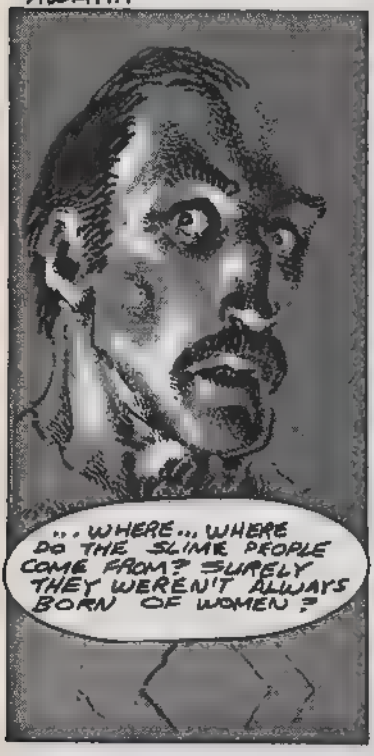
SHLIK



THE OLD PRIEST LOOKED AT ME WITH EYES FULL OF EVIL...



I FELT MY SELF GROWING SUDDENLY CALMER, LESS FRIGHTENED... I HEARD MY OWN VOICE SPEAKING, BUT FAR AWAY... MILES AWAY...



AT THAT MOMENT THE DARKNESS WITHIN ME MADE ANOTHER RUSH AND I FELL INTO UNCONSCIOUSNESS.
YEA, THE SIGHT OF THAT TEN CENT FRANKENSTEIN WAS TOO MUCH FOR POOR HECTOR -- HIS MIND CAVED IN LIKE A ROTTEN CHRISTMAS TREE!
...WELL FLAMMARION, YOU DON'T LOOK A DAY OVER A HUNDRED.
HEE HEE
THANK YOU, DOCTOR, IT'S DUE TO YOUR SKILL... I WAS THE FINEST OF YOUR CREATIONS! -- TOO BAD YOU WEREN'T SO FORTUNATE!
WELL, AS IT TURNED OUT I'VE DONE BETTER -- LOOK AT ME! NOT A DAY OVER TWENTY-EIGHT!
YES, THAT'S TRUE! AND YOU'RE FREE TO CONTINUE YOUR EXPERIMENTS!

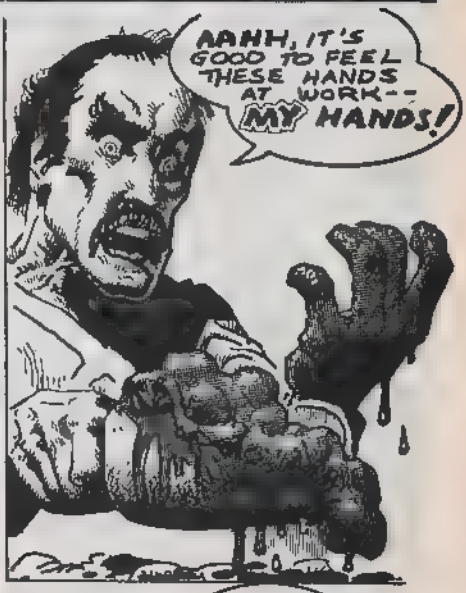
TELL ME FLAMMARION, IS SHE HERE?
WHY, YES... WE HAVE HER ON THE FOURTH LEVEL!
TAKE ME TO HER! I MUST SEE HER!

HEATHER! I MUST HAVE YOU BACK... I MUST!
BUT DOC, THERE ARE OTHERS AS BEAUTIFUL AS HER!

SILENCE! PREPARE MY EQUIPMENT!
SQUEEK
GLURGLE GLUG GLUG
CRAUK CRAUK

RATTLE RATTLE

OOH, BOY! THE DOC'S GETTIN' IT ON AGAIN!


AAHH, IT'S GOOD TO FEEL THESE HANDS AT WORK-- MY HANDS!

GLADDER OF FRESH KILLED VIRGIN, MASTER!
OUT WITH THE BAD GUTS! IN WITH THE GOOD GUTS!
WE HAVE A LARGE SELECTION OF BREASTS, MASTER!

SHE'S BEAUTIFUL! NOW WE MUST BREATH LIFE INTO HER!

CLICK CLICK CLICK CLICK

BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

OMMMMMMMMMM... NYAR YUGG ALOHA, LENG FRITH MUDRUZZZZZZ-

SSS ZAP KRAKLE

ZZZZ... MISHUGONA BLEK, R'LYEH, CRANIS BONA, Y SAKA TOO-UR!

BA DUMM

RODIN!

YES HEATHER... IT IS I.

YOU DESTROYED ME. YOU MADE ME PREGNANT WITH THAT AWFUL CHILD!... YOUR FRIENDS MURDERED ME TO GET THE BABY!

NO, HEATHER, THAT WAS MANY YEARS AGO. NOW I'VE GIVEN YOU LIFE! WE'LL BE YOUNG TOGETHER!

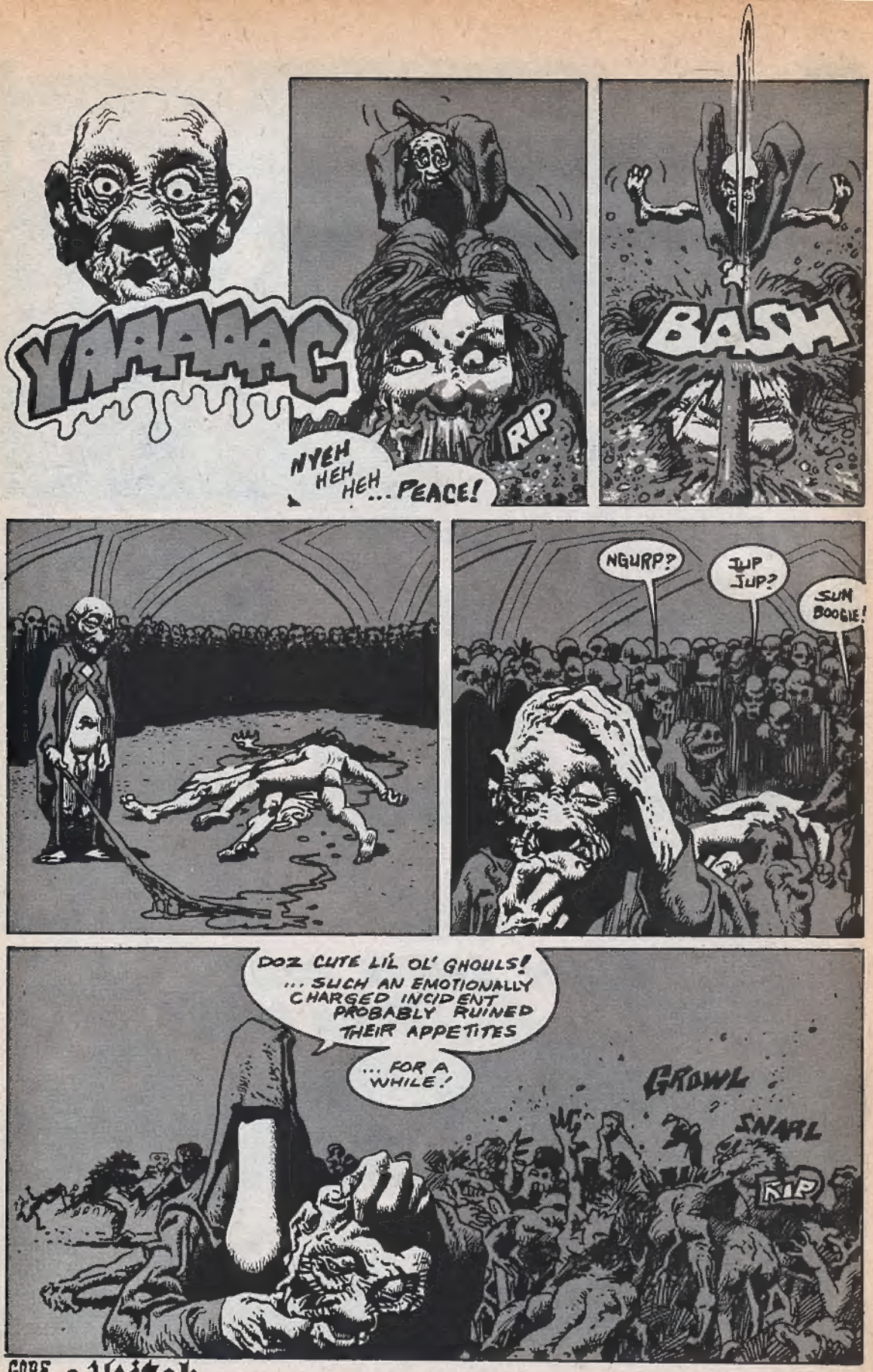
...YES, LUCIUS ...YOU GAVE ME... LIFE...

ISN'T IT MARVELOUS! WE'LL BUY A COTTAGE IN THE COUNTRY! WE'RE GOING TO BE VERY HAPPY!

YES, RODIN... THANK YOU FOR BRINGING ME BACK... NOW I WILL FIND PEACE... NOW...

RODIN, I HATE YOU! YEAAAGH!

GUK!


YAAAAAAG
NYEH HEH HEH... PEACE!
RIP
BASH
NGURP?
JUP JUP?
SUM BOOGIE!
DOZ CUTE LIL OL' GHOULS! ... SUCH AN EMOTIONALLY CHARGED INCIDENT PROBABLY RUINED THEIR APPETITES
... FOR A WHILE!
GROWL
SNARL
RIP

GORE - Veitch

... AND DON'T FORGET THESE **GOLDEN GASHERS!!**

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